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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between demographic diversity among members of school leadership councils and the nature and quality of their decision-making processes. A survey was mailed to all members of the leadership councils at 156 Los Angeles (California) Unified School District schools--of which 78 were involved in the shared decision-making (SDM) phase and 78 were involved in school-based management (SBM) phase. Fifty-seven schools, with a total of 682 surveys, qualified for inclusion in the study. Dependent variables included characteristics of the councils' functioning, and independent variables included aspects of the members' diversity. Findings indicate that differences in the amount of individual council experience negatively impacted group process. Greater role diversity had a positive effect on the level and quality of participation and on decision-making effectiveness. Gender and ethnic diversity had a minimal impact on the measured facets of council functioning--decision-making effectiveness, problem-solving effectiveness, noneducator involvement, and council effectiveness. Overall, demographic diversity among council members did not have an overwhelming impact on the nature of councils' operations. The findings indicate that, on the whole, council members do not perceive such negative consequences as, for example, that diversity makes the decision-making process more problematic. One table is included. The appendix contains dependent variable scales and items. (Contains 15 references.) (LMI)

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THE IMPACT OF MEMBERSHIP DIVERSITY ON SCHOOL COUNCIL DECISION MAKING

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THE IMPACT OF MEMBERSHIP DIVERSITY ON SCHOOL COUNCIL DECISION MAKING

School decentralization has been promoted and supported by school practitioners, policy makers, education researchers, and community leaders as a necessary school restructuring strategy. Borrowing from the private sector's practice of participative management, site- or school-based management shifts formal decision making authority away from the central administration to the school level. The move is away from the rigid, rules- and control-oriented bureaucratic hierarchies to looser, more informal, value-driven organizations that are more responsive to their local markets and environments.

While solid empirical evidence to support the efficacy of the reform is lacking, much has been written about the theory and the expected outcomes of decentralization. Specifically, literature points to several rationales for school decentralization. First, by decentralizing, schools would be more responsible for their own performance, thereby motivating teachers, administrators, parents, and the community to work together in developing a school culture that encourages creative and innovative solutions to address the problem of poor student achievement (Smith & O'Day, 1991; Hill & Bonan, 1991). Second, it is argued that personnel who know the clients best (e.g., teachers) are better judges of the clients' needs (Doyle, Cooper, & Trachtman, 1991). Third, research on participative management shows that workers are frequently more satisfied with their jobs and/or more productive (Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988), and this is especially likely when information, knowledge, and rewards are decentralized along with power (Lawler, Mohrman, & Mohrman, 1991). Lastly, as the typical mechanism for participation in decision making is an elected school council that involves teachers, administrators, and oftentimes parents, students, and community members (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990), decentralization provides an opportunity to secure a greater range of participation by individuals at the local school level in the governance of their school. This type of representation addresses the contention that the decision making

processes of many educational systems are too isolated, i.e., that the decision makers do not understand the real needs of the individual schools and the communities they serve.

In the past decade, schools across the country have implemented various forms of school-based management (David, 1989; Ogawa, 1992). While some are mandated by local or state policies (e.g., Chicago, Illinois; Kentucky), others were developed as a result of agreements between school districts and teachers' unions (e.g., Los Angeles, California; Rochester, New York). In Los Angeles, decentralization resulted from a 1989 collective bargaining agreement between the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). The implementation of decentralization in Los Angeles is a two-step process. In the first step, referred to as the Shared Decision Making (SDM) phase, each school elects a local leadership council comprised of school administrators, teachers, classified personnel, parent/community members, and in some cases, students (e.g., high schools). These representatives are elected on an annual basis by their constituents or participate through ex-officio status (e.g., the school principal and union steward, who serve as co-chairs for the council). Under SDM, the leadership council is given responsibility for a limited range of decisions in five areas (staff development, student discipline guidelines, scheduling of school activities, and guidelines for use of school equipment, and some local budget funds).

If a school so chooses, it can seek additional control over its operations by submitting a proposal to move into the second step of decentralization, School-Based Management (SBM). The proposal must delineate in detail the changes the school intends to implement and how the recommended changes would improve student achievement. Schools that move into the SBM phase are able to take charge of managing virtually any aspect of their operation, and may apply for waivers of existing policies that would preclude the implementation of their proposals. The proposals must be approved by the Board of Education, UTLA, and a Central Council comprised of members of the district and the union.

The degree to which schools can successfully implement changes and develop strategies that will improve student achievement depends largely on the council. The extent to which these councils can have a positive impact on school functioning will be largely determined by the quality of their decision making processes. Hence, a better understanding of factors that influence decision making effectiveness would be valuable for predicting the likely changes resulting from the decentralization effort and for taking steps to ensure that beneficial consequences do in fact occur. This study explores the relationship between demographic diversity among members of the leadership councils, and the nature and quality of the decision making processes utilized by those councils. The purpose is to gain a better understanding of the potential difficulties and benefits associated with school-site decision making under conditions of group heterogeneity.

RELEVANCE OF COUNCIL DIVERSITY

The topic of diversity in organizations is a timely and important focus of discussion. The management of a changing workforce has been a salient subject in administration classes, business human resources departments, and government agencies. Morrison (1992) discusses four reasons why executives promote the value of diversity in their business operations: to keep and gain market share, to reduce costs, to increase productivity, and to improve the quality of management in their organizations. Furthermore, she argues, the ability to capitalize on the contributions of individuals from different backgrounds is undoubtedly linked to overall organizational performance (Morrison, 1992). Government agencies also promote a better understanding of the workplace in a multicultural environment for similar reasons, e.g., to better serve constituents with varying expectations due to differences in ethnicity, gender, age, and other characteristics (Farr, 1992). However, although recruitment to diversify the workplace has been in practice for many years, empirical evidence indicating the consequences of diversification is limited.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, diversity of the student population is a prominent issue. Not only does the LAUSD enroll a large number of children, they comprise an extremely ethnically diverse group. In the Fall of 1991, a total of 628,989 students were enrolled in the district, with 13.1 percent identified as White, 14.8 percent African-American, 64.4 percent Latino, 5.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.9 percent Filipino, and .3 percent American Indian (based on figures from LAUSD's Information Technology Division). This diversity, combined with poor student achievement scores, leads to the contention that those governing the school system, especially in the central administration, do not adequately understand the varying needs of the different student groups. Thus it is argued that broader representation in the decision making process by teachers, parents, community members, and even students themselves, will enable greater expression of viewpoints that more accurately reflect the needs of the students. As a result, the most relevant problems can be identified and appropriate solutions devised. Moreover, because relevant constituents have had a voice in the decision process and are committed to decisions adopted by school leadership councils, these solutions are more likely to be implemented.

In LAUSD and elsewhere, then, school-based management is adopted because of the anticipated benefits for school-level decision making. The literature on group decision making supports the contention that diversity of group membership can have positive consequences for decision making process and quality. In heterogeneous groups, the different points of view held by members from different backgrounds can generate more diverse recommendations regarding problem solutions (Shaw, 1976), thus enhancing the probability of selecting an effective course of action. For example, Wanous and Youtz (1986) found that differences in viewpoints spark more in-depth discussions, leading to higher quality decisions. Groups with members from varying cultural backgrounds can also benefit from differential values and norms regarding effective group interactions. For example, groups composed of people from cultures that reflect collectivist (rather than

individualistic) orientations are likely to display more cooperative as opposed to competitive behavior (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991). Furthermore, when membership diversity reflects the representation of multiple constituent groups, participation in the decision process can generate broader-based commitment to the decisions made. It can also enable a better understanding of potential barriers and sources of resistance to implementation of these decisions. This knowledge and commitment are critical factors that help insure that decisions made are successfully carried out.

While these benefits of heterogeneous groups have been espoused, the literature also indicates that diversity can create some problems for group decision making processes. Opposing viewpoints from members based on differences in values, goals, and perspectives can create a perpetual conflict mode if the group is not well-managed. In turn, this can hinder decision making effectiveness (Maier, 1967), given a tendency for such groups to gravitate towards suboptimal compromise solutions. Multicultural groups can experience communication breakdowns (Cox, 1991), for example, as a result of cultural and language differences that inhibit shared understanding. Turnover may be higher in such situations as well (Cox, 1991). Finally, Wanous and Youtz (1986) point out that greater diversity in terms of solutions offered to a problem can sometimes lower acceptance of the decision as well as group member satisfaction.

Thus, research suggests that diversity may well be a two-edged sword. It can yield benefits which a group can draw on to enhance the quality of its decision making processes, but it can also produce barriers which serve to impede effective decision making. To the extent that school-based management results in a broader range of participation in a school's decision making process through leadership council membership diversity, the quality of decision making, and council functioning more generally, is likely to be affected. Of course, the net effect of a given level of diversity on the functioning of any particular council cannot be predicted, but across councils, greater heterogeneity is expected to have a measurable impact on council processes and outcomes. The purpose of

this study, therefore, is to investigate the nature of the relationship between membership diversity and council functioning.

To explore this relationship, we examine the level of diversity regarding five demographic characteristics of leadership council members. Two of these, gender and ethnicity, are the characteristics most often the focus of literature concerning increased diversity in organizations. It is widely assumed that diversity in terms of these two characteristics will influence group functioning. Two more features have to do with the experience base of the council members, first in terms of the amount of time they have served as a member of the council, and second in terms of the amount of time they have been associated with the LAUSD. Diversity in the amount of experience members have (and, implicitly, in the knowledge, expertise, and/or informal status that often goes along with amount of experience) is relevant to the functioning of most types of groups in work organizations. The final characteristic is the "role" of the council member, i.e., the constituent group that she or he represents. Not all groups in organizations are comprised of individuals who represent other people, yet there are many which do fit this mold. Since a key feature of the leadership councils is that they were designed to incorporate such representation, role diversity is certainly an issue relevant to council processes and outcomes. These five aspects of council diversity will be examined for their relationship to five facets of council operations. Since the variables associated with council operations are derived from the data, they will be described below after we identify the sample and the source of the data.

RESEARCH METHODS

Sample

The sample for this study consists of 57 schools from the Los Angeles Unified School District. In May of 1992, a survey was sent to all members of the leadership councils at 156 LAUSD schools, including all 78 schools that had, at that time, shifted to

the SBM phase of decentralization, as well as 78 randomly-selected SDM schools. A total of 1071 surveys were returned from 110 schools. Out of this group, only those schools that returned completed surveys from at least 75 percent of their council members are included in the present analysis. Fifty-seven schools, with a total of 682 surveys, qualified for inclusion.

Measures

Various characteristics of the functioning of the leadership councils at the sample schools constitute the dependent variables in this study. The measures for these variables were derived from data acquired through the survey mentioned above. The survey instrument consisted of 126 items (115 substantive items and 11 personal/demographic items). Responses to these items were based on a four-point Likert-type scale. Response options for some items were Completely Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, and Completely Agree, and for other items they were Never, Seldom, Often, Always. Factor analyses of the substantive survey items yielded a set of twelve factors, each of which formed the basis for a scale measuring some aspect of individual, council, or school functioning. For this study, five scales focusing on the operations of the leadership council are used as measures of the dependent variables. Scale scores were first calculated for each individual respondent as the average of her or his responses on the items comprising that scale. Scale scores were then averaged across the individual members of each school council to yield scale scores for each school. The five scales and the items comprising them are identified in Appendix A and described below.

Decision Making Effectiveness (six items, with a reliability coefficient of .74) refers to the process and methods used by the council to make decisions effectively, e.g., the extent to which consensus decision making is utilized. Problem Solving Effectiveness (six items, with a reliability coefficient of .72) focuses on the techniques used by members to solve problems effectively, e.g., the acquisition of relevant information and resources.

Non-Educator Involvement (seven items, with a reliability coefficient of .75) measures the level of participation and degree of influence of council members who are not professional educators, e.g., the degree to which parents take responsibility for assigning themselves tasks within the council. Council Effectiveness (eleven items, with a reliability coefficient of .86) and Council Ineffectiveness (four items, with a reliability coefficient of .55) are measures of the overall quality of the councils. While Council Effectiveness focuses on positive aspects, Council Ineffectiveness focuses on problematic elements.

The predictor variables for this study are a set of measures of the diversity of council membership. Again, council diversity was measured in terms of five characteristics, namely gender, ethnicity, length of time as a member of the council, length of tenure in the LAUSD, and role. Survey respondents were asked to provide the relevant demographic information, and this information was then utilized to calculate measures of diversity. These measures were calculated as follows.

Gender diversity was calculated by subtracting .5 from the percentage of women or men on a council (whichever was highest). This index could thus range from zero, in which case there were an equal number of men and women (greatest diversity), to .5, in which case all the members of the council were of the same gender (least diversity). Ethnic diversity was calculated by first computing the percentage of members on a council in each of four categories, namely, White, Hispanic, African-American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. (While the survey also included an Other category, the number of respondents identifying themselves as Other was so small that it was not useful to include this category in the calculation of ethnic diversity.) Next, for each school, the variance across these four percentages was computed. Again, if there were an equal number of council members in each category (greatest diversity), the variance would be zero. The variance would be highest if all council members were of a single ethnicity (least diversity). The measures for the remaining three diversity variables were calculated in a similar manner as ethnic diversity. For time on the council, the three categories were less than one year, one to two

years, and over two years. For tenure in the district, the four categories were less than five years, five to nine years, nine to fifteen years, and more than fifteen years. For council role, the five categories were principal, teacher, classified personnel, parent or community member, and student. In each case, higher scores reflect less diversity on the council in terms of that characteristic.

Analyses

Relationships between the five predictor variables and each of the five dependent variables were assessed through multiple regression. Since higher scores on the measures for these five variables indicate *less* diversity, negative regression coefficients indicate that greater diversity in that variable is associated with more favorable perceptions of council operations. For each regression, the multiple R^2 indicates the extent to which the overall heterogeneity of the council membership appears to influence that facet of council functioning.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the standardized coefficients from the five regressions. Only two of the regressions yielded significant overall results. First, council diversity explained forty-three percent of the variance in the Non-Educator Involvement scale ($p < .01$). Diversity with regards to roles and tenure in the district were the key measures in this regression, as the coefficients for both of these variables were significant ($p \leq .05$). However, the effects were in opposite directions, indicating that greater diversity in the roles held by council members is associated with increased involvement by those who are not professional educators, while their involvement *decreases* when the amount experience in LAUSD becomes more diverse. These same two variables, with the same signs, are significant in the Decision Making Effectiveness regression, in which a total of twenty-eight percent of the variance was explained ($p < .01$). Thus, council decision making is

perceived to be better when there is more heterogeneity in terms of roles held and more homogeneity in terms of LAUSD tenure. Two other variables approached significance in this regression ($p \leq .10$). Both gender and ethnic diversity have a marginally negative impact on council decision making effectiveness. Only one other variable approached significance in any of the remaining three regressions. Diversity in district tenure also has a marginally negative impact on council problem solving effectiveness.

TABLE 1
Results from Multiple Regressions of
Measures of Council Functioning on Council Diversity Measures

DIVERSITY PREDICTOR VARIABLES	DEPENDENT VARIABLES				
	Decision Making Effectiveness	Problem Solving Effectiveness	Non- Educator Involvement	Council Effectiveness	Council Ineffectiveness
Gender	.208*	.077	.110	.162	-.108
Ethnicity	.228*	.164	.153	.052	-.057
Time on Council	.045	-.138	-.078	-.184	.055
District Tenure	.308**	.266*	.262**	.009	.026
Role	-.361***	-.122	-.663***	-.166	.117
Multiple R ²	.278***	.145	.432***	.075	.029

* $p \leq .10$

** $p \leq .05$

*** $p \leq .01$

DISCUSSION

These results suggest, first, that greater heterogeneity among council members in terms of the amount of experience they have in the district negatively impacts "group process" (i.e., decision making, problem solving, and patterns of involvement) but does not affect the quality of council "outcomes" (in particular, those assessed by the Council Effectiveness scale). Since the large majority of the members of the leadership councils have over nine years experience in the district, greater heterogeneity implies a greater number of less experienced members. As such, these findings can be interpreted in one of two ways. First, it could be that council members discount the value of those individuals with more limited experience, such that a greater presence of these individuals generates the perception that the council is operating less effectively than it might otherwise be. Alternatively, it could be that relative inexperience does actually have a negative impact on council functioning, such that councils with more homogeneous membership in terms of lengthier district tenure may in fact be utilizing more effective group process. Either or both of these explanations may help explain our results. Of course, it is also interesting to note that the amount of time spent serving on the council does not generate similar effects. Apparently, council experience is not relevant as a determinant of the quality of council functioning. Perceptions of council process and outcomes are both independent of the mix of such experience among council members.

Role diversity demonstrated a positive impact on two variables. For one of these, Non-Educator Involvement, the results are fairly straightforward. Since teachers are the group with the largest representation on the councils, followed by principals, greater role diversity occurs when there are more classified personnel, parents, community members, and/or students on the councils. Since these are the members whose involvement is the focus of the items comprising this scale, it is not surprising that, as their membership increases, so does the level and quality of their participation. With less numerical

dominance by the professional staff, the other members may feel less threatened and thus more willing to volunteer their opinions and services. As for Decision Making Effectiveness, the results indicate that greater involvement by people other than professional staff is seen as having a positive impact on the council. This would suggest that the differences in experiences and viewpoints reflected in the various roles are seen as contributing to rather than hindering council decision making processes. Furthermore, since role diversity generated the strongest relationships found in the analysis, it appears that role-based differences have more relevance to school level decision making processes than any of the other sources of diversity.

A surprising finding from our analysis is that gender and ethnic diversity have minimal impact on these facets of council functioning. Since the majority of members on most of the councils are women, greater gender diversity typically means more male members. Likewise, greater ethnic diversity usually means more people of color serving as council members. Hence, the one coefficient approaching significance for each of these variables suggests that, as the number of men or people of color increases, decision making effectiveness is somewhat reduced. However, these relationships are not strong ones, and thus this conclusion should be accepted tentatively. Furthermore, there are no other findings which would suggest that gender or ethnic diversity have an impact on the council one way or the other. All in all, council members seem to believe that council functioning is largely independent of either gender or ethnic composition.

While council diversity was found to have a significant effect on Decision Making Effectiveness and Non-Educator Involvement, such effects are noticeably absent from the remaining three scales. One reason that diversity is unrelated to the Problem Solving Effectiveness scale may be that the items comprising this scale are primarily oriented towards assessing activities the respondents would engage in individually, rather than activities of the council as a whole. Diversity is more likely to affect council processes than these individual activities. As for Council Ineffectiveness, part of the problem may be with

this scale itself. Its reliability coefficient is the lowest of the five scales and below .70, which is a common rule of thumb for adequate scale reliability. To some extent, the scale is also a "hybrid" in that three of the items focus on council process characteristics while the remaining item assesses the council's impact on the school. Thus, the lack of relationship between diversity and this scale may be in part a methodological artifact.

The most surprising of these three are the results for the Council Effectiveness scale. Since overall council quality is likely to be determined, at least in part, by the nature of member participation and the quality of council decision making, one might have expected diversity to affect this variable as well. Apparently, however, diversity can affect characteristics of the council's group process without having an effect on its outcomes for the school. In other words, even though council members' evaluations of process characteristics are affected by the amount and type of diversity within the group, their overall evaluation of the benefits of the council remain independent of diversity issues. One explanation for these results might be that the perceived benefits of the council are driven primarily by a comparison of school-level decision making to more centralized decision making. Regardless of the amount of diversity present and its impact on the council's group dynamics, members may assess the effectiveness of the council largely in terms of their evaluation of the benefits of decentralization.

All in all, the results of this analysis indicate that, for this sample of school leadership councils, demographic diversity among the members of the councils does not have an overwhelming impact on the nature of the councils' operations. In terms of previous research on the consequences of group diversity, these results do not provide straightforward evidence either for the case that diversity has a positive impact or for the case that it has a negative impact. In fact, there is some indication that different types of diversity have different types of effects, some positive and some negative, albeit relatively limited in both cases.

For those who are participating on the leadership councils or who otherwise have a stake in their effectiveness, these findings should probably be considered good news. School-based management rests on the assumption that broader participation in school decision making by a more diverse set of people will enhance the quality of those decisions. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, "broader participation" is defined as more representation of a greater range of constituents. According to our results, this type of diversity is in fact positively related to decision making effectiveness. Other types of diversity typically advocated for greater inclusion in organizational decisions, in particular gender and ethnicity, are not explicitly addressed in LAUSD's decentralization design. A concern frequently expressed, of course, is that diversity along these dimensions may make decision making more problematic, if not in terms of outcomes then at least in terms of the conflictual nature of the process. Yet our findings indicate that, in this sample as a whole, council members do not perceive any such negative consequences. We might conclude that, for now, this lack of negative consequences is a positive sign. The next step, though, is to learn how to capitalize on greater diversity among council membership so that the councils and their schools can take full advantage of the information, values, and perspectives held by all of their members. Our findings leave us optimistic that this will be possible to accomplish.

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APPENDIX A

Dependent Variable Scales and Items

DECISION MAKING EFFECTIVENESS

- The Council makes decisions by reaching consensus.
- All members of the Council have an equal opportunity to participate in discussions.
- There is sufficient time at meetings for the Council to function well.
- Council decisions are made in a timely fashion.
- When people bring up new issues to the Council, they are presented clearly.
- The Council informs parents about the school's goals and activities.

PROBLEM SOLVING EFFECTIVENESS

- I discuss items on the Council's agenda with the people I represent (e.g., other parents, teachers, etc.) before the Council makes decisions.
- I get relevant information to help the Council make decisions about how this school is run.
- When a problem exists within the Council, I work toward a solution.
- Council meetings are held at times that allow me to attend.
- I work cooperatively with others on tasks needed by the Council.
- I actively seek out resources I need (e.g., information, cooperation, and services) rather than wait to have them given to me.

NON-EDUCATOR INVOLVEMENT

- Parents' ideas about improving school effectiveness significantly influence decisions made by the Council.
- Parents take responsibility for assigning themselves tasks within the Council.
- I involve community members other than parents in a variety of activities at the school.
- Parent/community involvement in the school has increased since the Council was formed.
- Classified personnel are active, contributing members of the Council.
- The community can and does influence decisions that impact this school.
- School staff regularly recognize the contribution that parents make to the school.

COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS

- Council meetings are a valuable use of time and energy.
- Reaching consensus is the most effective form of decision making.
- In general, the quality of decisions made at my school has increased now that SDM/SBM is in place.
- The Council provides the most effective form of leadership at this school.
- I am happy with the decisions made by the Council in the area of staff development.
- The goals of the school can be achieved without Shared Decision Making/School-Based Management.
- Shared Decision Making/School-Based Management has had a positive impact on my school.
- Staff members at this school appreciate the contribution that the Council makes to the school.
- I am happy with the decisions made by the Council in the scheduling of school activities.
- The Council has been instrumental in resolving problems at this school.
- Shared Decision Making/School-Based Management has the potential to make a positive overall impact on my school.

COUNCIL INEFFECTIVENESS

- Important decisions at my school seem to have been made before the Council meets.
- Council decisions are dominated by a few members.
- The principal at my school has the most influence over what goes on at Council meetings.
- The Council has created new problems at this school.